

**Exploration of Womanhood and the Assertion of Self:
A Comparative Study of Meghna Pant's *One and a Half
Wife* and Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride***

Dr. Neeraj Kumar
Magadh University
(India)

Abstract:

Feminism emerged as a worldwide movement to secure women's rights on the one hand and love, respect, sympathy and understanding from males on the other. It focused on women's struggle for recognition and survival and made them realise that the time has come when they should stop suffering silently in helplessness. The images of women in South Asian novels have also undergone a change in the last three decades. Earlier women were conceived as a symbol of self sacrifice and suffering. In due course of time women writers affected by Western Feminism have explored the alternative ideal of self assertion. The feminist writers have emphasised a new perspective of women. They have rebelled against stern patriarchy and male chauvinism. Meghna Pant's *One and a Half Wife* reveals the struggle and circumstances faced by a woman, Amara Malhotra, entangled in the Indian orthodox culture. Here she is caught in a tug-of-war between old beliefs and new ones, between parents who favour obedience and new friends who encourage independent thought. Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *The Pakistani Bride* poignantly describes the circumspect world of women in a world dominated by men where women are not individuals but objects to be possessed, nothing more than a piece of land and sometimes a beast that can be traded with. Zaitoon not only defies her destiny but also challenges it by running away from the clutches of her tyrant husband. Women are like commodities in the tribal society to be bartered and traded. Once married they become part of the property of their husbands, which the latter must protect. Bapsi Sidhwa reinforces this macabre image of woman graphically in

various sections of the novel. Both the writers have opined that women have occupied a subaltern position that is oppressed both by traditional notion of patriarchy and by colonialism. But their ways of treating the theme of womanhood are quite different – Meghna Pant on the one hand portrays the character of Amara in new light, showing her as a blend of traditional and modern wife, whereas Bapsi Sidhwa in her novel has delineated the character of Zaitoon as a subdued, submissive and obedient wife who shows her courage at the end. The present paper intends to make a comparative study of both the novels.

Keywords: Feminism, Patriarchy, Submissive, Male-Chauvinism, Orthodox Culture

Research Goals

The objective of the paper is to present a woman in a new colour as independent, bold and assertive who has to struggle a lot in the patriarchal social structure. It will also highlight the efforts undertaken by a woman to break the fetters of woman's servility and oppression and prove her worth to the world.

Methods

In writing the paper direct method has been used. The primary sources and the secondary sources have been taken into consideration while preparing the manuscript.

Feminism emerged as a worldwide movement to secure women's rights on the one hand and love, respect, sympathy and understanding from males on the other. It focused on women's

struggle for recognition and survival and made them realise that the time has come when they should stop suffering silently in helplessness. Quest for feminine identity is largely a post-independence social phenomenon in India – a phenomenon influenced by various changing forces of reality, freedom movement progressive education, social reforms, increasing contacts with the west, urban growth.

The condition of women is equally miserable in Indian society. It is basically patriarchal where a woman is given the secondary role. In the male dominated society a woman has been the victim of male hypocrisy, exploitation and violence but she could not freely narrate or openly discuss these experiences. However, with the passage of time, the women folk became conscious of their rights and they with their male counterparts struggled for achievements in the professional and economic spheres and deconstructed the image of a submissive, repressed and self-effacing being. The picture that emerges is of a self-reliant, emancipated and happy individual, a person intelligent, confident and assertive.

The images of women in South Asian novels have also undergone a change in the last three decades. Earlier women were conceived as a symbol of self sacrifice and suffering. In due course of time women writers affected by Western Feminism have explored the alternative ideal of self assertion. From the suffering women in the novels of Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai et al. to the recent subversions of the traditional image in the works of Chitra Fernando, Anees Jung, Bapsi Sidhwa and Taslima Nasrin, the women have come a long way. The recent writers explore the wonderful consequences of Indian women renaming self and experience. Individually they have gained a name collectively an identity. Their new strength stems from personalities defining their own terms lending grace to living. To voice a pain, to divulge a secret was considered sacrilege, a breach of family trust. Today voices are raised without fear and are heard outside the walls of homes that once kept a woman protected and also isolated. The feminist writers have

emphasised a new perspective of women. They have rebelled against stern patriarchy and male chauvinism.

Meghna Pant's *One and a Half Wife* reveals the struggle and circumstances faced by a woman, Amara Malhotra, entangled in the Indian orthodox culture. Being the only girl child of her parents, she always dreamt of American education and also of a prince like groom to support her the rest of her life. Though she migrated to the USA alongwith her parents, she was not able to assimilate that American culture and mentality to that of Indian beliefs. The novel has also highlighted the effect of divorce on the life and honour of women in general and Amara Malhotra in particular. Unlike most Indian immigrants, Amara is not destined to achieve the American Dream. Much to the anxiety of her parents & the spirited Biji and the doting Baba & Amara leads an unremarkable life. She marries a Harvard educated millionaire, Prashant Roy. Amara had learnt that in Indian society, everything & prayer, education, family, beauty, chastity and career was a rung of the ladder of life, which had to be climbed to reach the top rung, marriage. She tried her best to adjust in American way of life but, "everything fits together in America except the immigrant's identity." (Pant, 2012, p.83) Throughout her life Amara kept on learning how to be a good wife but despite her best efforts, she could not be the wife Prashant wanted. There was none who could understand her and her feelings. Even Biji, her mother dismissed her concerns, "Marriage like that only. Don't be asking more than you deserve. And don't be talking bad about new family in front of me or other" (2012, p.100).

Moreover, the attention and respect that Amara did not get from her husband came to her from the Indian American community. Her marriage sounded good on paper, "Beautiful apartment in Manhattan, a husband earning a six figure salary, vacations in Hawaii and movies every week" (2012, p.100). In order to impress Prashant, Amara to keep herself fit, cut down her meals to twice a day and went four times a week to Equinox gym. However, this was not enough as sex remained a hurried process between them without any affection. Amara still did it because it was the only way

she could keep her hopes of a baby alive. Prashant never wanted Amara to have white friends, "Remember we need this land, not its people (2012, p.107). He did not mind working or networking with them, but when it came to friendship, he wanted only Indians. Prashant had many expectations from Amara, especially in the context of his mother & to fluff the pillows, bring out the most darling comforter and warm the milk. At those times, Amara thought the word 'wife' was too small to accommodate its responsibility. Of all the roles Amara had played – daughter, student, employee, sister and wife & wife was the only syllable and disproportionately the most difficult. Prashant was not comfortable with the relationship between himself and his wife, Amara, "This marriage is a sham. We are not like a normal husband and wife. I don't love you. I never will" (2012, p.131). Amara shared her worries with Stacy, one of her friends in America. Prashant was thinking in terms of divorcing Amara. Amara in a disturbed mood observed, "As an Indian in America, divorce is a big deal. What is seen as liberating in America is bondage for Indians." (p.44) Ultimately Amara had realised that Prashant was adamant on divorcing her. Her entire dream was shattered and her worst fears came to life haunting her, "how was she going to live as a divorcee...?" (2012, p.169). She saw the rest of her life boil down to cruel isolation and rejection.

With the passage of time Amara's focus shifted to a career from marriage. Over the last few months, she had been witness to stories of divorces, legal wrangles, gold– digging wives, wife beating husbands, shattered children & and she realised that comparatively she had had a quick divorce, which hurt when it happened, but healed quicker because it was firm and definite. She often thought that she had brought violence upon her family by being a divorcee running her own business and letting her parents house her. Finally she decided to be a single mother, though Lalit had come to her life as a big support. He wanted to marry her but to Amara, marrying him will be an escape, a way of running away from her problems. But this is also a fact that she appreciates his sense of love and loyalty, courage or fairness. She knows it fully well that he would

make a wonderful husband. He would not only make her happy but would also protect Kiara, the adopted child. Even then she is not ready to marry Lalit as she feels that she will be free only when she is in a state of unknowing. Amara's marriage collapses and thus she returns to the land of her birth, to the city of Shimla. Here she is caught in a tug-of-war between old beliefs and new ones, between parents who favour obedience and new friends who encourage independent thought.

Bapsi Sidhwa is a celebrated diasporic writer of Pakistan, living in America and churning out stories from her experiences of the subcontinent. Her writings are concerned with issues of the marginalized that may include the proprietorship of women in a patriarchal society. *The Pakistani Bride* is the first novel by Bapsi Sidhwa but the second to be published after *The Crow-Eaters*. The novel owes its genesis to a trip undertaken by the writer to the Karakoram Range where she was told this gruesome story of a young Pakistani girl who had dared to run away from an intolerable marriage, and had been killed in the Hindukush mountains by her tribal husband. The novel poignantly describes the circumspect world of women in a world dominated by men where women are not individuals but objects to be possessed, nothing more than a piece of land and sometimes a beast that can be traded with. She has to observe *Purdah*, to cast off prying eyes of men, representing a sexually repressed society. Her docility, acquiescence, submissiveness is the pride of her lord and her smallest act of disobedience is treated as an attack on his inveterate honour. Women in this land have no say whatsoever in matters personal or professional, private or public, domestic or societal, regional or national. Such is the story of a young, enthusiastic girl Zaitoon who is given in marriage to a ruthless tribal for honour's sake. Zaitoon not only defies her destiny but also challenges it by running away from the clutches of her tyrant husband.

Throughout its long history, civilization has been dominated by concepts that established the supremacy of man over woman. Aristotle's declaration that 'the female is female by virtue of a certain

lack of qualities' asserts an unconscious attempt to negate a woman's individuality. In western thought, the body has been historically associated solely with women, whereas men have been associated with the mind. Susan Bordo, a modern feminist philosopher, in her writings elaborates the dualistic nature of the mind/body connection by examining the early philosophies of Aristotle, Hegel and Descartes, revealing how such distinguishing binaries such as spirit/matter and male activity/female passivity have worked to solidify gender characteristics and categorization. Bordo goes on to point out that while men have historically been associated with the intellect and the mind or spirit, women have long been associated with the body, the subordinated, negatively imbued term in the mind/body dichotomy. The notion of the body being associated with women has served as a justification to deem women as property, objects, and exchangeable commodities (among men).

French philosopher, novelist and essayist, Simone de Beauvoir in one of her famous quotes, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" encapsulated an argument that propelled a number of questions, simple and complex, into the minds of thinking and rational individuals of the society. Beauvoir in her polemical work *The Second Sex* argued.

...there was no such thing as 'feminine nature'. There was no physical or psychological reason why women should be inferior to men, and yet, throughout history and across cultures, women had always been second-class citizens. Even when worshipped and adored, they have had no autonomy and received no recognition as rational individuals, any more than when they have been abused and denigrated (Waugh, 2006, pp. 320-21).

Writers of the twentieth century have felt an urgent need to represent this conscious struggle to resist patriarchy as also to disturb the complacent certainties of the patriarchal structure, through their writings. Their entire thrust lay on the projection of

women as 'rational, thinking and speaking individuals' and also to express her misery in her own words. They continuously strived towards making their women characters a part of history making.

Women writers, the world over, consciously made efforts to assert a belief in sexual equality and overthrow sexist domination in order to transform society. They adopted the medium of literature not only to explore the anguished consciousness of the oppressed and exploited, but also to focus the indifference of the society towards them. Mary Ellman in *Thinking about Women* (1968), in connection with the sperm-ovum nexus of the pre-Mendelian days when men regarded their sperm as the active seeds which give form to the waiting ovum, which lacks identity till it receives the male's impress, "reversed the male dominated point-of-view by suggesting the independent identity of the ovum" (Selden et al, 2005, p.125). These writers from the sub-continent have rarely raised their voice for equal rights but they have been striving hard to bring to focus the indifferent and callous attitudes of the society towards women. Some of the writers like Tasleema Nasreen, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, to name a few, have been quick to respond to the clarion call of their Western counterparts. Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *The Pakistani Bride* (1983) is one such poignant tale of Zaitoon, an orphan girl from the plains of Punjab, adopted by a Kohistani tribal, Qasim. Having lost his entire family to smallpox, Qasim moves to the plains but destiny brings him nearer to home once again in the wake of India-Pakistan riots of 1947. He is on the Lahore bound train when anti-Muslim mob attacks its passengers mutilating whomsoever they could lay their hands on. Zaitoon's parents are massacred in this fanatic violence and in the dark of night she mistakes Qasim to be her father and clings to him for safety. Qasim adopts this little orphan and brings her up as his daughter taking pride in her intelligence and her adulation for him. Zaitoon is hardly fifteen when in a fit of rustic nostalgia for his tribe, he promises her in marriage to one of his tribesmen's son. Life becomes a nightmare for Zaitoon after her marriage. She not only has to face the rugged and all-engulfing environment of the Karakoram Range

but also a ruthless, jealous and brutish husband, a typical tribal for whom life is nothing but a question of honour which rests on matters as trivial as a handful of grains.

The opening part of the novel acquaints the readers not only with the harsh surroundings but also to the rigors of day-to-day survival of its men:

Chiselled into precocity by a harsh life in the mountains, Qasim had known no childhood. From infancy, responsibility was forced upon him and at ten he was a man, conscious of the rigorous code of honour by which his tribe lived (Sidhwa, 1983, p.7).

Whereas men folk are the bearers of the honour of the tribe, the women are a part of man's moveable property quite like the beasts that he rears and raises for profit. Women can be traded against a pending loan or can be given off to honour one's word. Without even asking for her consent, she can be tethered to some other post, "A wife was a symbol of status, the embodiment of a man's honour and the focus of his role as provider. A valuable commodity indeed and dearly bought" (p. 138).

The novel, though, centered on the story of Zaitoon, introduces the readers to two other 'brides', Afshan and Carol. Afshan is the young bride of Qasim, who on seeing her husband on the night of their wedding, "didn't know whether to laugh or cry. She had been told that her groom was young, but she had thought that he would be, like herself, at least fifteen. She began to laugh, while tears of disappointment slid down her cheeks." (p.10) Afshan surrenders to her destiny, without batting an eyelid because she is aware of the fact that her destiny is controlled not by fate but by the men of the society she lives in. In contrast, Zaitoon is unable to accept this fate and her fiery, rebellious spirit rises against this slavish attitude. She knows that such disobedience will win her nothing but death, yet some distant dream of life away from these rugged men and mountains gives her fragile body an extraordinary strength and she dares to take a leap towards life.

In a few days Zaitoon is married off to Sakhi and thus begins the nightmare of her life. Despite Sakhi's effort to domesticate her,

he is unable to check Zaitoon's indomitable spirit. His repeated thrashings and brutish behaviour does not deter the rebel in her. She strikes a chord with Hamida, Sakhi's mother, in whom she finds a sympathetic soul and a mother-figure. She finds some solace going to the river, spending some meditative moments on the rocks near the banks of the river and reliving the moments she had spent in proximity with the civilized human beings. She longs to be in the company of her gentle father, her uncle, Nikka and aunt Miriam. Sakhi forbids her from going there and once when he finds her sitting there he hurls stones at her, grazing her forehead and other parts. This brutal treatment makes her realize that she couldn't possibly spend the rest of her life in these mountains among such men. She is fully aware of the fact that her defiance could lead her straight to the clutches of death. Despite all the odds being against her, her dauntless spirit refuses to surrender and one fine morning on the pretext of fetching water, she runs away taking a blanket with her to save her from the chill and a bundle of stale bread enough to survive a few days.

Hamida, who is the first one to detect Zaitoon's absence from the household, secretly wishes for her escape to the world of sanity, away from this frenzied madness, from this world based on men's honour, from this world of 'veils and wails', "Honour! she thought bitterly. Everything for honour, and another life lost!...Men and honour. And now the girl..." (1983, p. 228) She is a witness to the threatening disgrace of the men of the clan. Meanwhile, Zaitoon had been hiding in the mountains for over ten days and still she could not find the way to the Dubair Bridge, her route to escape. She went round the mountains and every time she seemed to come back to the same rocks and boulders. Coming across natural dangers lurking around her, a diseased vulture and a snow leopard, hardly did she realise that the greatest danger lurking around was 'man'. The day she sees the "sky blue stretch of wet satin trembling against white banks" she is filled with gratitude but her destiny has still more in store for her. She is raped by two tribal men on the banks of the river. Though her body cringes in pain and anguish, her zest

for life is still undiminished and her resolution to reach to safety is undeterred, "She crawled farther and farther from the beach, creeping up through fissures and stony crevices. For a time she snuggled beneath a salty overhang, like a wounded animal, to lick her bruises." (1983, p.232) Finally she reaches the Dubair bridge and is saved from the savage clutches of her husband, brother-in-law and father-in-law, who are out hunting for her near the bridge by the army officer, Major Mushtaq Khan.

The other 'bride' of the novel – Carol, has been shown to be in a highly perplexed state of mind resulting from a clash of her lofty romantic western ideals of 'womanhood' and the practical problems faced by her through her marriage to Farrukh, an offspring of the feudal system. Her courteous and devoted husband shows his true colours and mindset when he tries to assert his male authority over Carol through jealous arguments. His nervous and suspicious manner became unbearable to her. The jealousy, possessiveness and compromises that mark the lives of both Zaitoon and Carol differ merely in degree but it is a difference that literally marks the variance between life and death. The two women who initially seemed to strike a common chord of vulnerability with each other are inevitably separated by a Cultural Divide, "But Carol, a child of the bright Californian sun and surf, could no more understand the beguiling twilight of veils and women's quarters than Zaitoon could comprehend her independent life in America" (1983, p.180).

Carol begins to find it difficult to adjust to this environment of "repressed sexuality". Farrukh's unbearable jealousies, his insane suspicions were not making things work between them and they were 'falling apart'. Their marriage was struggling to survive. Sidhwa, however, is quick to bring to light the hypocrisy in Carol's nature. Though troubled by Farrukh's behaviour and allegations she is not ready to part with all the luxuries which she is enjoying currently as the wife of a rich, feudal landlord, "these compensations made her stay despite Farrukh's morbid jealousy. They prevented her from carrying out her repeated threats to divorce him & to go back home" (1983, p.114). She enters into a relationship with

Major Mushtaq Khan considering it to be an act of just revenge on Farrukh for all his male possessiveness.

Women are like commodities in the tribal society to be bartered and traded. Once married they become part of the property of their husbands, which the latter must protect. Bapsi Sidhwa reinforces this macabre image of woman graphically in various sections of the novel. *The Pakistani Bride* does not merely chronicle the events, it does explore the feminine consciousness which is unique in post colonial fiction. Though societies like these will take an eternity to change, one can already feel a whiff of the changing times in the novel. Zaitoon had to face innumerable hardships in her journey from the plains to the mountains and back, she may have suffered abuse, torture, rape at the hands of her tormentors. She represents the woman of today, though illiterate, yet ready to take on the world. She is not a persona, she is a metaphor & the symbol of courage. Her attitude to overthrow tyranny and resent subjugation in every form lends voice to the multitudinous women around her.

Both the writers have opined that women have occupied a subaltern position that is oppressed both by traditional notion of patriarchy and by colonialism. But their ways of treating the theme of womanhood are quite different – Meghna Pant on the one hand portrays the character of Amara in new light, showing her as a blend of traditional and modern wife, whereas Bapsi Sidhwa in her novel has delineated the character of Zaitoon as a subdued, submissive and obedient wife who shows her courage at the end. The expression of women's experience through writing is one of the modes of resistance used by the feminist writers to question and redefine the notion of patriarchy. Women resisting the patriarchal notions establish the fact that there are power relations within the society that have to be challenged and demolished. Moreover, women are extensively represented in the postcolonial Indian contexts, severely marginalized, infuriatingly belittled and socially entrapped in a system ruled by patriarchy. Their subjugation in society has

been reiterated by prevailing patriarchal ideas that are firmly rooted in culture, tradition, custom, heritage and value system.

Results

In the male dominated society, a woman has been the victim of male hypocrisy, exploitation and violence where she could not freely narrate or openly discuss her experiences. However, Meghna Pant's and Bapsi Sidhwa's women characters especially Amara and Zaitoon emerge as assertive and dominating at the end. They are capable of expressing their emotions boldly. They constantly long to renew their abilities in order to enjoy autonomy in the society. The outcome of the paper is that the women no longer suffer from any identity crisis. They, with their male counterparts, struggle for achievement in the professional and economic spheres and deconstruct the image of a submissive, repressed and self-effacing being.

References:

- Pant, Meghna. (2012). *One and a Half Wife*. New Delhi: Raj Press.
- Selden, Raman, et al. (2005). *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, 5th Edition. New Delhi: Pearson, Print.
- Sidhwa, Bapsi. (1983). *The Pakistani Bride*. New Delhi: Penguin, Print.
- Waugh, Patricia. (2006). *Literary Theory and Criticism*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, Print.